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Republic of Moldova

The Year 2015 in Politics

ARMAND GOȘU

Nothing will be the same from now on. 2015 is not only a lost, failed year, it is a loop in which Moldova is stuck without hope. It is the year of the “theft of the century”, the defrauding of three banks, the Savings Bank, Unibank, and the Social Bank, a theft totaling one billion dollars, under the benevolent gaze of the National Bank, the Ministry of Finance, the General Prosecutor's Office, the National Anti-Corruption Council, and the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS). 2015 was the year when controversial oligarch Vlad Plakhotniuk became Moldova's international brand, identified by more and more chancelleries as a source of evil¹. But 2015 is also the year of budding hope that civil society is awakening, that the political scene is evolving not only for the worse, but for the better too, that in the public square untarnished personalities would appear, new and charismatic figures around which one could build an alternative to the present political parties.

After a tense political campaign, the result of the parliamentary elections on 30 November 2014 was surprising, considering that the population's anger at the political class had reached alarming rates. The elections were won by the Party of Socialists (SPRM) by 20.5% (25 seats), with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPM) right behind them, 20.1% (23 seats), the Party of Communists (PCRM), 17.4% (21 seats), the Democratic Party (DPM) – 15.8% (19), and the Liberal Party (LP) with 9.6% and 13 deputies. Calculations on paper indicated a wide majority of 55 out of 101 votes for a new “pro-European” coalition between LDPM-DPM-LP, which had been modified several times in the previous five years.

¹ The Republic of Moldova seems to be in a profound depression, if judged by what the polls show. For the question “How much you trust the following institutions?”, the figures are depressing. 66% do not trust the government at all, 24% do not really trust it. 67% do not trust Parliament at all, and 25% do not really trust it. 77% do not trust President Timofti at all, while 16% do not really trust him. 56% do not trust the justice system at all, while 27% do not really trust it. 60% of respondents do not trust at all political parties, and 27% do not really trust them. Only 11% have some trust in political parties. The Church is in the top position in terms of trust, with 38% of respondents having a lot of trust, and 36% only moderate trust. Please, see *Public Opinion Barometer, Republic of Moldova*, November 2015, p. 35.

The Stolen Billion – Delayed Reaction Explosion

This time, however, the dynamic was different, and it was caused by the public announcement that Moldavian banks were missing no more and no less than a billion dollars. Right away, the Moldovan *leu* plummeted, going down by 30%, prices went up accordingly, the predictable result being the dramatic impoverishment of the population. According to World Bank figures, the per capita GDP fell from 2.238 to 1.740 US dollars, and Moldova secured its position as the poorest country in Europe. Under public opinion pressure, the Speaker of Parliament Adrian Candu published the report issued by the company (Kroll) which investigated the case. This, however, was recently contradicted by the General Prosecutor's Office and the NAC, when they indicted former PM Vlad Filat.

Whoever counted on the idea that Moldova's cauldron would not boil over was sorely mistaken. At least by half. In spite of the winter cold, groups of hundreds of young people coagulated first on social media, and then gathered in the Grand National Assembly Square². An initiative group formed, which went on to form the Justice and Truth Civic Dignity Platform (JTCDP). The first major protest took place on 22 February 2015, under the slogan "We want the Leu back!". Calls for unification with Romania were heard right from the first large-scale JTCDP rally. However, the unionist message was more a diversion to obscure the main demand of the protesters, which was to conduct investigations into the plunder of banks, find the culprits, punish them and recover the billion dollars³. The April 8 rally brought over 20.000 people to the square. One month later, on May 3, about 20,000 participants gathered again⁴. Rallies against the current political class had become a social phenomenon. Fairly early on, controversial oligarch Vlad Plakhotniuk, DPM's backer, became the epitome of evil for protesters. It was also the crowd's reaction to the manipulation perpetrated by the oligarch controlled press and directed against the JTCDP. It is also true that the leaders of the Platform did not manage to send a coherent message. The clarification came as late as the 7 June rally, when the LP, campaigning in Chișinău, managed to hijack the JTCDP rally where people were calling for an investigation into the theft of a billion dollars,

² <http://www.platzforma.md/un-interviu-cu-inga-grigoriu-si-liviu-vovc-despre-orasul-demnitatii-platforma-da-si-planurile-de-viitor-ale-protestatarilor/> (accessed 5 Jan. 2016).

³ <http://petrunegura.blogspot.ro/2015/02/scrisoare-deschisa-dlui-nicolae-josan.html> (accessed 5 Jan. 2016).

⁴ <http://www.platzforma.md/despre-o-manifestatie-de-protest-cu-demnitate-adevar-si-cinstece/> (accessed 5 Jan. 2016).

turning it into a support rally for Dorin Chirtoacă, nephew to LP chairman Mihai Ghimpu, who was running for one more term as mayor of Chişinău⁵. The result was dramatic: thousands started to shout “Shame!” at Chirtoacă and Ghimpu. Cars and buses came into the square with flags and posters, which increased the confusion, while Ghimpu was claiming that the protesters who did not support his nephew Chirtoacă were “Moscow's agents”⁶. The message was immediately echoed by other Liberal leaders, who declared that the JTCDP was “with Putin”⁷. On September 6, two rallies were held in the center of Chişinău, one with over 50.000 people involved, in the Grand Assembly Square, by the Platform, where they spoke only Romanian, while the second meeting, the Russian speaking one, led by former communist Grigore Petrenko, was held in front of the Science Academy, and was attended by a few hundred people⁸. Fear [was] spread that the two protests might clash. An obvious piece of manipulation, as both protests were against the kleptocratic political class and oligarch Plakhotniuk. There is no doubt that the calls were for recovering the stolen billion. That this was done in Romanian or Russian was secondary. A maximum of 30 protesters, led by Petrenko, passed by Plakhotniuk's house, Nobil Hotel, Plakhotniuk's headquarter, then by the General Prosecutor's Office headquarters, heading for the National Bank. Near the Prosecutor's Office, they were attacked by about 80 to 100 policemen, including special forces. The epilogue to this story: Petrenko and a few other protest leaders that were in front of Plakhotniuk's house have now been in jail for a few months. This is a sign that the oligarch, who is said to control the justice system in Moldova, is afraid of protesters, and tries to root out any protest aimed at him personally. After the grand protest on September 6, JTCDP protesters occupied the square, setting up a tent camp. Shortly after, it was replicated by another tent camp, a few hundred meters away, in front of Parliament. The second camp was organized by the pro-Russian parties, SPRM and Our Party, chaired by the mayor of Bălţi, the no less controversial Renato Usatyî⁹. If the platform camp used exclusively the Romanian language in speeches, posters, and slogans, the rallies organized by Igor Dodon and Usatyî were bilingual. In terms of demands, the socialists followed to the letter the platform's agenda. Between the first rally in February and September, demands have evolved from investigation of the billion dollar theft and changing the managers of the institutions responsible with supervision

⁵ <http://www.platzforma.md/racul-broasca-si-stiucsa-sau-mitingurile-din-piata-marii-dezbinari-nationale/> (accessed 5 Jan. 2016).

⁶ Interview with Igor Boţan, Chişinău, September 2015.

⁷ Interview with Petru Negură, Chişinău, September 2015.

⁸ <http://www.platzforma.md/demisia-bun-si-ce-facem-mai-departe/> (accessed 5 Jan. 2016).

⁹ <http://ava.md/analytics-commentary/032564-analiticheskii-doklad-renato-usatii-put-ot-inzhenera-kombinata-pitaniya-mzhd-do-vozmognogo-kandidata-na-post-prezidenta-moldovi.html> (accessed 10 Jan. 2016).

and control of banks to demanding the resignation of the general prosecutor and the heads of NAC and SIS. The lack of reaction from the powers that be in Chișinău, who were not impressed by the greatest wave of protests in the last two decades, radicalized the mob that in September demanded the resignation of the government, along with the PM, the resignation of President Nicolae Timofti, and early elections¹⁰. A new rally, starting on October 4th, confirmed civil society's capacity to mobilize tens of thousands of people, which spread well beyond Chișinău, in fact spreading all over the country. Now, with a real danger of protests getting out of hand, the press controlled by the oligarch, brandished the threat that the 7 April 2009 scenario might be repeated. The greatest danger that was publicly circulated was a Ukrainian type evolution, which all of society feared. The social tension accumulated, also because of the way in which the media controlled by oligarch Plakhotniuk depicted the demonstrations organized by the platform, and the continuous attacks against its leaders, especially slander directed against Andrei Năstase, the chairman of the Grand National Assembly Council¹¹.

Tens of thousands of people in the streets were exerting great pressure on the leaders of the governing coalition, who were asked for minimal concessions. Hence the need for an outlet to reduce popular pressure, the least of which was to fabricate a guilty party.

The manipulation of protesters by introducing the theme of union with Romania, breaking up the mass of protesters into Romanian and Russian speakers, which resulted in two protests instead of a single one, the campaign of demonizing the JTCDP run by the Plakhotniuk controlled media, allowed the “pro-European” coalition in Chișinău to hold on to power in spite of the emotions raised by the huge protests, the biggest in the last two decades. Lacking a decisive reaction from those in power, the civic platform could either self-dissolve, or – seduced by the figures yielded by opinion polls – turn into a political party. Which is precisely what happened. As long as Plakhotniuk's whole media machinery was attacking the new party and its leader, the chances of this political construction grew. The main argument for a large part of Moldovan voters and public opinion was that Andrei Năstase and his team could not be bought by the oligarch. Considering that the latest opinion poll revealed the worst score for Plakhotniuk (85% do not trust him at all and 7% not really), establishing distance from the oligarch is proof of political intelligence for any party or politician.

Politically, 2015 was a nightmare year which turned the Republic of Moldova from a “success story” into a failure of the Eastern Partnership and the

¹⁰ Interview with Arcadie Barbăroșie, Chișinău, September 2015.

¹¹ Interview with Igor Boțan, Chișinău, September 2015.

European Neighborhood Policy¹². Only now did it become obvious that the “success story” sold in Brussels, Berlin, Paris, Washington or Bucharest was just window dressing for a lot of dirt, a lack of will to carry out reforms demanded by the EU, and, most of all, a rejection of any attempt to start the fight against high level corruption.

As the LDPM had the highest number of votes of all pro-European parties, the position of prime minister went to it, while that of Speaker of Parliament went to the DPM. The wrong calculation on the part of Liberal-Democrat leader Vlad Filat, who forgot that Moldova is a parliamentary republic. In fact, Filat was not holding a single card, because the appointment of Iurie Leancă, the incumbent PM, was imposed.

Iurie Leancă is maybe the most highly educated, cultured, likable and empathetic political man in Chișinău. He definitely is, if not the only, then one of the very few Moldovan politicians with whom Western leaders have a dialog. He certainly was the best foreign minister in the short history of the Republic of Moldova. He became PM on 31 May 2013, as a compromise solution after the Pădurea Domnească scandal, which led to the break-up of the Alliance for European Integration ruling coalition. Iurie Leancă continued, even more successfully, to consolidate Moldova's brand name as the “valedictorian of the Eastern Partnership”. It was not just a PR operation, the Filat and Leancă governments achieved important reforms, taking great strides in bringing Moldova closer to Europe. However, the reforms – such as they were – proved not to be enough to bring Moldova to the tipping point that put it irreversibly on a European trajectory.

At the top of the LDPM, Filat, as chairman of the most important party in the pro-European coalition in Chișinău, had his pride hurt by the fact that he was overshadowed by the PM, which generated a constant tension in the relationship with premier Leancă. The latter, in the end, abandoned the LDPM, after nominating President Nicolae Timofti for a new term, and was rejected by Parliament on 12 February 2015. Leancă formed his own Christian Democratic political body, the European Popular Party of Moldova.

An obscure businessman, Chiril Gaburici, who had behind him the LDPM, was appointed head of the government, for reasons that are still not clear. He was a sort of technocratic premier heading a political government of a

¹² Corina Rebegea, „No Country for Oligarchs”, www.cepa.org/content/no-country-oligarchs, (accessed 29 Jan. 2016); Anna Nemtsova, „Inside the Uprising Against Moldova's Donald Trump”, www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/01/27/inside-the-uprising-against-moldova-s-donald-trump.html, (accessed 28 Jan. 2016); Natalia Otel Belan, Marc Schleifer, „Moldova's pro-Western Facade”, www.politico.eu/article/moldovas-pro-western-facade-protest-chisinau-russia-ukeaine/, (accessed 30 Jan. 2016); Stanislav Secieru, „Moldova: between Tough Love and a Popcorn Strategy”, https://blog.pism.pl/blog/?p=1&id_blog=44&id_post=758#, (accessed 22 Feb. 2016).

minority coalition. However, his ministers were controlled by leaders of the parties. Shortly after taking over governance, a journalistic investigation brought to light irregularities with the premier's school records, more precisely the fact that there was no high school diploma in them¹³. However, this detail did not bring to an end Gaburici's short political career. What was fatal to him, however, was the fact that, on June 6th, he demanded the resignation of the entire leadership of the General Prosecutor's Office and the National Bank, under accusation of tolerating the theft of the billion dollars from Moldovan banks. In a letter to Timofti and Candu, PM Gaburici announced that he would resign if he was not granted satisfaction:

„Moldova is smothered by corruption, its financial system is bleeding. And the price is paid by every citizen, but not by the guilty. After yesterday's meeting of the National Committee for Financial Stability, I realized that the entire financial system of the Republic of Moldova is under siege, and that several financial institutions are in danger. The government lacks leverage, and the relevant institutions hesitate in solving these problems. [...] I don't want to stand by and see interest groups destroy the country. And I don't negotiate with anyone our children's well-being and future”¹⁴.

The poignancy of the letter did not impress the president of the country, the Parliament and the leaders of the parties, who refused to dismiss the General Prosecutor and the head of the National Bank, so that Gaburici resigned on the 12th of June¹⁵. After that, he refused even to appoint an interim premier until a new government was sworn in¹⁶.

On July the 23rd, when Maia Sandu was nominated as PM¹⁷, and it seemed that the sun was finally rising on Moldova's street, Liberal leader Mihai Ghimpu gave an interview to PRO TV Chișinău in which he criticised her candidacy¹⁸. Mrs. Sandu, Minister of Education, with an excellent professional reputation, thanks to her significant achievements in reforming the system, also had a very good public image which she did not want to sacrifice on the altar of political scheming in Chișinău. Therefore, she publicly presented several

¹³ <http://www.zdg.md/editia-print/investigatii/cv-ul-necenzurat-al-premierului> (accessed 12 Jan. 2016).

¹⁴ <http://www.trm.md/ro/politic/chiril-gaburici-cere-demisia-conducerii-pg-bnm-si-cnpf/> (accessed 15 Jan. 2016).

¹⁵ <http://unimedia.info/stiri/video-ultima-ora-gaburici-si-a-anuntat-demisia-95570.html> (accessed 15 Jan. 2016).

¹⁶ <http://inprofunzime.md/stiri/politic/chiril-gaburici-refuz-sa-asigur-interimatul-functiei-de-premier---1007231.html> (accessed 15 Jan. 2016).

¹⁷ <http://www.pldm.md/stiri/8774-maia-sandu-candidat-la-functia-de-premier> (accessed 12 Jan. 2016).

¹⁸ <http://inprofunzime.md/stiri/politic/mihai-ghimpu-la-in-profunzime.html> (accessed 12 Jan. 2016); <http://www.ziarulnational.md/mihai-ghimpu-nu-faceti-din-maia-sandu-erou-nu-este-ea-mai-desteapta-ca-noi/> (accessed 12 Jan. 2016).

conditions in order to accept the position of PM (among them, changing the prosecutor general and the governor of the National Bank). As the DPM and LP announced they would not vote for Maia Sandu, LDPM proposed another candidate for PM, Valeriu Streleț. The new government was endorsed by the Parliament on 30 of July¹⁹.

The long political crisis in Chișinău, the more and more obvious oligarchic control over state institutions, and the failure to reform caused international financial institutions to suspend relations with the Republic of Moldova, blocking financing, without which the country was risking collapse. Romania was the only country which, in an unclear political game which sparked mistrust in Brussels and Washington, promised its eastern neighbor a loan, the first installment of which (60 million EUR was claimed to help Moldova make it through the winter.

As the protests spread and grew, and the economic situation worsened, the coalition decided, on 14 of October, to ask for the resignation of the general prosecutor, one of the most important demands made by the protesters. However, the following day, October 15, on the first day of the parliamentary session, General Prosecutor Corneliu Gurin addressed Parliament to call for immunity to be lifted for LDPM chairman Vlad Filat. Parliament voted with a wide majority to lift Filat's immunity, who was accused of defrauding the Savings Bank²⁰. A sad but predictable end to one who may be the most talented Moldovan politician. His decline had started a while back, in the spring of 2013, when the Constitutional Court had issued that strange ruling barring Filat from taking the prime ministerial chair. As PM Streleț acted decently and did not distance himself from his former party chairman, Filat, who supported him and promoted him to the position of premier, and opted to let justice run its course, the DPM, together with the communists and the socialists voted on 29 October a censure motion that brought down the government²¹.

Since both Brussels and Bucharest said that the resumption of financial aid to the Republic of Moldova hinged on a pro-European government taking power, the DPM tried to disrupt the PDL faction in Parliament, and when it became obvious that this attempt had failed, they announced negotiations with the LDPM. However, the latter said they would take part in government on certain conditions: depoliticizing some institutions, and changing the Prosecutor General and the head of anti-corruption, considered to be Plakhotniuk's men. Both the LP and the DPM categorically rejected LDPM's conditions.

¹⁹ <http://www.agerpres.ro/externe/2015/07/30/alerta-republica-moldova-are-un-nou-guvern-premierul-desemnata-valeriu-strelet-primeste-votul-de-incredere-al-parlamentului-17-20-22> (accessed 12 Jan. 2016).

²⁰ <http://www.agerpres.ro/externe/2015/10/15/alerta-republica-moldova-ridicarea-imunitatii-lui-vlad-filat-votata-in-parlamentul-de-la-chisinau-16-26-41> (accessed 12 Jan. 2016).

²¹ <http://www.dw.com/ro/guvernul-strelet-a-cazut-ce-urmeaza/a-18815067> (accessed 12 Jan. 2016).

The fact that both the Gaburici and Streleț governments were brought down by the DPM, controlled by Plakhotniuk, when they called for the prosecutor general and the head of anti-corruption to be changed, cannot be by chance. Also, Maia Sandu, nominated for prime minister, was rejected by the DPM and LP for her demand for the general prosecutor and head of anti-corruption to be changed. The heads of the two institutions are considered loyal to Plakhotniuk, through whom the controversial oligarch controls the justice system in the Republic of Moldova.

PCRM - Controlled Implosion

Even a superficial analysis of the political situation in Chișinău in 2015 would place at the top of the list of major events the dissolution of the PCRM, a party that has long been dominant on the political scene in Chișinău. Without PCRM's controlled dissolution, many of the political games in 2015, from the Gaburici cabinet getting voted in to Chirtoacă's election as mayor of Chișinău, ending with Plakhotniuk's attempt to craft for himself a parliamentary majority, would not have been possible. The number of seats held by the communists had been constantly dropping: 71 deputy seats (2001), 56 (2005), 60 (April 2009), 48 (July 2009), 42 (2010) and 21 (2014). After the 14 deputies left for the Social-Democratic platform, Vladimir Voronin's PCRM had only 7 deputies left. The grand party that dominated the political scene is only a shadow of its former self. Less than two years ago, the PCRM was the apparent winner in parliamentary elections.

How could the PCRM, the formerly large and powerful party, end up the shadow of today? A meeting that never happened apparently sealed the fate of Moldovan communists. On 21 May 2014, in the Chișinău office of businessman Emmanuil Grinshpun, the president of the Jewish Congress of Moldova, a Russian billionaire, Oleg Boyko, the head of Finstar Financial Group, was waiting for Voronin. The leader of the communists came in a car, stopped in front of the building for a few minutes, then left and didn't look back. Voronin and Boiko were supposed to shake hands on the conditions negotiated in Moscow by Mark Tkachuk, the ideologue of Moldovan communists, in order for Russia to help in the upcoming election campaign. The fundamental issues were two: the election campaign was run under the slogan of fighting against the oligarchs and Moldova joining the Eurasian Union. That same evening, Voronin gave an interview on the Moldova 1 channel, in which he said that his country could not join the Eurasian Union, because that does not exist. More than that, he reiterated his favorite thesis of the lamb suckling two sheep. Voronin had flipped again, after a few years of saying that Moldova needs to

turn to the East and join the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan Customs Union²². The following day, on the 22nd, Tkachuk sent a letter to the PCRM Politburo in which he insisted that without support from Moscow, the chances for Moldovan communists in the elections get slimmer. In a dramatic gesture, Tkachuk announced he would resign his parliamentary seat. As late as 6 June, the ideologue of the communists held a press conference in which he blamed Plakhotniuk for the situation in the PCRM, as he allegedly had bought Voronin and had prepared a coalition between communists and democrats. The Tkachuk group was blocking this collaboration with the DPM, reason for which Grigore Petrenco, Iurie Muntean, Alexandru Petkov, Zurab Todua, which the press had dubbed “the Taliban”, were removed, as the first step made by the PCRM Central Committee Plenary Session on 7 June²³. After the Plenary, the PCRM leadership abandoned their policy of integrating Moldova into the Eurasian Union and their critical tone towards the establishment and they resumed a balanced, pro-European rhetoric. Another team formed around Voronin, headed by Artur Reshetnikov, who left the party on 21 December 2015, joining Plakhotniuk's Social Democratic Platform. What the “communist Taliban” did not understand, and still don't to this day, was that Voronin's change of direction was due less to the bags of dollars they believed the communist leader got from Plakhotniuk, and more to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which was in a volatile stage. Crimea's annexation, the mockery of a referendum organized there by the Russians in March 2014, the destabilization of Donbass in April-May 2015, the launch of the Novorossia project, had a major impact on Voronin. It was a sort of Kozak Memorandum, 2014 edition, which caused the communist leader to turn to the West. For a Moldovan patriot, as Voronin thinks of himself, the priority was the country's stability and the avoidance of a Ukrainian type scenario.

The Kremlin did not regret the PCRM defection. Vladimir Putin did not trust Voronin, and found quickly in the SPRM, led by Igor Dodon and Zinaida Grechannyi, the ideal instrument to promote Russian interests in Moldova. Various combinations that culminated with Renato Usatyi abandoning the election race raised the percentage for Socialists from 1 to 21%, turning the party supported by Putin into the unexpected winner of the 30 November 2014 elections. The vanity of the Kremlin leader, whose photo had been spread all over the Republic of Moldova by Grechannyi and Dodon, had been satisfied.

Brussels was happy, because a pro-European majority was taking shape, and Moscow was too, since the socialists supported by the Kremlin were leading. The PCRM turned from a leader of the opposition into a “hinge party”,

²² <http://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/vladimir-voronin-bolshe-ne-lev-kak-partiya-kommunistov-utratala-identichnost-i-oka-21028> (accessed 30 Dec. 2015).

²³ <http://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/delo-antifa-rezist-mif-o-popytke-gosperevorota-v-moldove-11868> (accessed 30 Dec. 2015).

ready to support a pro-European government without getting anything in return. The PCRM hinge could be fixed by one man only, Plakhotniuk.

Plakhotniuk for Prime Minister

The most controversial public personality in Moldova is oligarch Vladimir Plakhotniuk²⁴. Born in December 1965, probably (in other documents this appears as 1 January 1966, most likely it was registered in January), in Călărași raion of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, one of the 15 USSR republics. He obtained a degree in food engineering from Chișinău Technical University. A turning point in his career, according to himself, was supposed to have occurred in 2002 at Cotroceni Palace, where the then president of Romania, Ion Iliescu, introduced the future oligarch to the president of the Republic of Moldova, Vladimir Voronin, who was visiting Bucharest, in the following words: “May I introduce to you my friend, representing Romanian business from Moldova”²⁵. President Iliescu's “friend”, Plakhotniuk, was at that point an obscure Moldovan businessman who had arrived in Bucharest under conditions that are still not very clear. In 2002 he was invited to the delegation of Romanian businessmen, called to meet the president of Moldova, and the delegation of Moldovan businessmen who accompanied him to Romania; Plakhotniuk had just been appointed to Petrom Moldova, the branch of the most important Romanian oil company²⁶. According to several sources, Plakhotniuk was personally supported by various government ministers in the Adrian

²⁴ The personalities enjoying the most confidence (free response) in the Republic of Moldova, according to the Barometer of the Republic of Moldova. November 2015, p. 37, are the following: Renato Usatyî – 11%; Igor Dodon – 6 %; Maia Sandu – 5 %; Vladimir Voronin – 4 %; Iurie Leancă – 4 %; Andrei Năstase – 4 %; Marian Lupu – 4 %. The margin of error is +/- 3%. Recently, in February 2016, the CBS-AXA poll confirmed the ranking: Renato Usatyî – 11,5%; Igor Dodon – 7,7%; Andrei Năstase – 5%; Maia Sandu – 4,6%; Marian Lupu – 2%. <http://www.timpul.md/articol/sondaj-partidul-nostru---32-2-psrm---20-3-da---13-5-pas---10-1-pdm---7-ppem---6-pcrm---5-2-pl---2-pldm---0-8-88739.html> (accessed 25 Feb. 2016).

In the November 2015 barometer, according to responses to a closed question, how much do you trust the following political figures, Vlad Plakhotniuk is the figure with the least amount of trust, 80%, with 7% saying they do not really trust him. Only 2% trust is within the margin of error. President Timofti does not fare much better. 78% do not trust him at all, and 11% do not really trust him. Only 5% trust him. Usatyî fares best with this question, with 24% trusting him, and 13% trusting him very much. (*Barometrul opiniei publice*, cit., p. 38). The highest level of mistrust, according to the CBS-AXA poll, is engendered by the same Vlad Plakhotniuk, with 93%, followed by Filat and Ghimpu.

²⁵ <http://unimedia.info/stiri/-19621.html> (accessed 16 Dec. 2015).

²⁶ <http://revista22.ro/60046/anticorupie-original-la-chiinu.html> (accessed 15 Dec. 2015).

Năstase government²⁷. Most likely, Plakhotniuk got Romanian citizenship in 2002, when he was appointed director for Petrom Moldova. The double citizenship was revealed by the press as late as 2011. Starting in 2009, Plakhotniuk had another identity in Romania, under the name Vlad Ulinici²⁸, with different ID documents that listed a different birth date, among other things. Becoming very influential in communist president Voronin's entourage, Plakhotniuk is believed by the authors of the 800-page long research *Oligarkhicheskaya Moldova* to be the godfather of Moldovan oligarchic capitalism, based on the control of the main financial flows. The bases of this mechanism were laid between 2005 and 2009, during the second communist governance. After April 2009, the time of the so-called Twitter revolution in Chişinău, the Alliance for European Integration (AEI), which ruled in Moldova since fall of 2009 until recently, not only did not dismantle the old financial structures, but developed them creatively²⁹. The main oligarchs in the first year of AEI governance were Anatol Stati, Vladimir Plakhotniuk, the LDPM – Filat, the LP – Ghimpu, the CPRM – Voronin, and a discreet but very influential, with their own businesses representing Russian business in Romania (a group formed around the 1990s around Lukoil Romania³⁰). In fact, the ranking of the richest Moldovan largely confirms this list³¹.

The philosophy of the oligarchs is very simple. They slice up Moldova to maximize profit from any activity. The jewels of the crown are: a) the Ministry of the Economy, which controls Moldova's entire industry and energy complex, issues certificates and licenses (for export and import), as well as the Agency for Public Property; b) Customs, which is under the Finance Ministry, bring in 70 to 75% of state revenue; c) the National Bank; d) the Ministry of Transportation (the biggest grants and loans received were aimed at the development of infrastructure³²). How did Plakhotniuk succeed, within the space of only a few years, to eliminate or reduce the weight of the other oligarchs and grab hold of the Moldovan state? Obviously, not with help from

²⁷ <http://www.flux24.ro/cine-e-papusarul-de-la-chisinau-legatura-cu-psd-si-cosmin-gusa/> (accessed 16 Dec. 2015).

²⁸ http://adevarul.ro/news/eveniment/vladimir-plahotniuc-oligarh-treilea-om-stat-dubla-identitate-moldova-romania-1_50ad6e177c42d5a66394ff29/index.html (accessed 15 Dec. 2015).

²⁹ Bogdan Țârdea, Victor Ciobanu, *Олигархическая Молдова*, Chişinău, 2013, pp. 605-606.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 618-621.

³¹ The amount of assets remains a mystery, and data being vehiculated vary wildly. Forbes Russia claims that the assets of the richest Moldovans in 2010 were: Stati – \$ 2.5 billion, Plahotniuc – \$ 2 billion, Filat – \$ 1.2 billion, Valeriu Păsat – \$1 billion, Nicolae Ciornâi – \$1 billion, Oleg Voronin – \$ 0.7 billion. The most plausible figures offered in 2010 by *Delo magazine* in Kiev are: Anatol Stati – 500 million \$, Vlad Plahotniuc – 300 million, Nicolae Ciornâi – 120 million.... Oleg Voronin – 70 million, Ion Sturza – 30 million, Vlad Filat – 30 million (tenth in the ranking). *Ibidem*, pp. 698-700.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 605-606.

various agencies, not even the Moldovan Customs. Plakhotniuk's key for success is – according to most commentators – control over the justice system. Former general prosecutors Valeriu Zubco (2009-2013) and Corneliu Gurin (2013-2016) were believed to be close associates of the controversial oligarch. Courts, commercial courts, the Center for Combating Economic Crime and Corruption (CCECC), the Supreme Council of Prosecutors, the Higher Council of Magistrates, and even the Constitutional Court, it is sometimes said, all these are supposed to be controlled by Plakhotniuk through various blackmail or corruption schemes.

Control over the judiciary³³ allowed Plakhotniuk to secure his assets, to increase his wealth by hijacking businesses and legalizing the operations in courts, and to secure veritable networks which, using the banks and courts in Moldova, managed to launder for the Russian mafia over 20 billion dollars in only a few years³⁴.

But what do Plakhotniuk's assets amount to? The controversial oligarch's wealth statements are extremely parsimonious with relevant information. Like the 2010 wealth statement, the first, or all the subsequent ones, talk nothing of the things that any child in Chișinău knows by heart by now. Those documents say nothing about the hotels, television stations, famous discos and bars, or even the jet that the notorious oligarch owns. There is mention of only two apartments he owns downtown Chișinău and 4 garages where he keeps his 3 Mercedes, the ones he lists as owning. The only company mentioned is Prime Management SRL. Most of the wealth is concentrated into a holding³⁵ run by a Dutch off-shore company. It conceals the Prime TV, 2 Plus, Canal 3 and Publika TV television stations, the news portals, advertising agencies, the hotels Nobil and Codru, etc, while the luxurious jet that takes Plakhotniuk around is the property of Nobil Air.

One would not exaggerate to say that a single man controls an entire country, albeit small and the poorest in Europe on top of that. This is a well-

³³ The accords that lay the basis of the AEI show the way in which the main institutions of the state are politically controlled. Moldovan Democrats controlled the general prosecutor's office as early as 2010, according to provisions in the agreement.

³⁴ <http://jurnal.md/ro/justitie/2015/11/4/memoriu-spalari-de-mld-de-i-atacuri-raider-prin-justi-ia-din-rm-1176356/> (accessed 15 Jan. 2016); <http://jurnal.md/ro/economic/2015/5/21/cronologic-cum-a-fost-jefuita-banca-statului-sau-reidman-paznic-la-bem/> (accessed 15 Dec. 2015).

³⁵ OTIV Prime Holding BV. Most likely, the acronym OTIV comes from the members of his family, Oxana, wife, Timofei and Inochentie, sons, and Vladimir. The holding comprises OTIV Prime Services BV, OTIV Prime Real Estate BV, OTIV Prime Hospitality BV, OTIV Prime Media BV, OTIV Prime Financial BV.

known fact among European commissioners and the Council of Europe³⁶ Secretary General, or senior officials with the State Department³⁷. However, the international agenda is rife with cases, and Moldova is much too small, so that Chişinău is only on Bucharest's radar. However, it was Bucharest itself which launched Plakhotniuk into big business, in 2002, as we have shown above. His door to high level politics was the next step. The controversial character has emerged from the shadows, where he was running back door games, and climbed the political stage after 2009, when power was taken over by the communists. It is true that Plakhotniuk has played a positive role in several moments of crisis in the past, contributing to the formation of the AEI, the Vlad Filat government, and promoted a pro-European discourse. Plakhotniuk was also supposed to be the architect behind President Nicolae Timofti's election, on 16 March 2012, after a long presidential hiatus of almost 3 years³⁸, which kept generating political crises.

In time, however, relations between the two Vladimirs, Plakhotniuk and Filat, broke down blowing up the government coalition in February 2013, when the LDPM voted with the communists to dismiss Plakhotniuk as the deputy speaker of Parliament, and Lupu as President of the Republic of Moldova, while the DPM voted, also alongside the communists, to bring down the Filat government. This crisis ended up with Filat as a loser, who, to no avail, humiliated himself publicly by apologizing to Plakhotniuk in the hope of returning to his position as a premier. That was a useless gesture, since the Constitutional Court had decided that the man accused of corruption and convicted by no-confidence vote cannot be prime minister. Behind that decision, which brought quite an innovation to jurisprudence, was Alexandru Tănase, son of the late Constantin Tănase, who published the *Timpul* newspaper, a unionist publication partially financed from Bucharest. A talented politician and attorney, Al. Tănase had been one of Filat's fellow party members, but eventually became a personal adversary of the LDPM leader and resigned from the Constitutional Court. Hence the suspicions expressed by observers of the political scene in Chişinău that Plakhotniuk controls the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova. Filat's fall coincides with Romanian PM Victor Ponta's takeover of relations with Moldova, after the landslide victory of the Social-Liberal Union in the parliamentary elections of

³⁶ See Thorbjorn Jagland's in *New York Times* http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/11/opinion/bring-moldova-back-from-the-brink.html?_r=1.

³⁷ Discussions in Brussels, Bucharest or Chişinău with two European Commissioners and foreign diplomats (September 2015).

³⁸ Judge and head of the Higher Council of Magistrates, a structure controlled by the controversial oligarch, N. Timofti was supposed to be "Plakhotniuk's man", according to Sergiu Mocanu, an excentric fighter against corruption in Moldova. In addition, the son of the president, Nicu Timofti, had worked for Prime TV, Plakhotniuk's first TV station. Bogdan Țârdea, Victor Ciobanu, *Олигархическая Молдова*, cit., p. 619.

December 2012 in Romania. Filat and the LDPM were part of the European Popular Party. The former premier in Chișinău had been supported by President Traian Băsescu. The ally of the Romanian Social Democrats in Moldova is Lupu and Plakhotniuk's DPM, and both parties are in the Socialist International.

After the elections of November 2014, it had become obvious that Filat no longer controlled anything, he had become a shadow of what had been the most talented politician of his generation, with over 50% confidence in polls, but also, according to Chișinău gossip, one of the most corrupt. At Coalition meetings he was quiet, accepting almost anything he was asked. He was the ideal partner because he did not raise any issue. The people close to him said that he expected to be arrested, but at the beginning of the following year³⁹.

In the summer of 2015, Plakhotniuk resigned from Parliament and announced he would retire from public life. The oligarch's negative image and his limited resources were the reasons invoked by close associates when asked to explain this decision. However, Plakhotniuk, far from the limelight, was preparing new strikes. Underground, he feels like a fish in the water, controlling from there informally state institutions, blackmail files, materials smearing his adversaries, "he's responsible for nothing while influencing everything"⁴⁰.

In spite of the fact that in summer Plakhotniuk withdrew from Parliament, and on 15 October, when Filat's immunity was lifted, he self-suspended from the position of first vice-president of the DPM, when the Democratic delegation was holding consultations with President Timofti on 14 December, Marian Lupu proposed the DPM backer for prime minister. The discussion was extremely tense. The following day, the DPM chairman put up an interview on infotag.md, threatening Timofti with dismissal:

"We talked to the president, and there is pressure on him, it is visible, I have never seen Mr. Timofti in this state of agitation, and it is extremely obvious that someone is applying unacceptable pressure on him, I hope he's not being blackmailed, God forbid!... We shall see to what extent President Timofti is captive, how the ones pressing him have taken captive the presidential institution, because we are already discussing a problem of national security".

For the first time in almost four years of being in office, President Timofti answered through a firm communique categorically rejecting Marian Lupu's allegations, adding that, at the discussions on 14 December, the DPM insisted that the head of state designate Plakhotniuk as prime minister. Timofti met western ambassadors, to whom he complained about the DPM threats.

In turn, the press in Chișinău started speculating, saying that Timofti was being blackmailed by Plakhotniuk with files on his sons, in order to force

³⁹ Interview with a member in the LDPM leadership (Chișinău, 26 September 2015).

⁴⁰ www.platzforma.md/protestele-din-moldova-in-citeva-momente/ (accessed 20 Feb. 2016).

him to accept the nomination wanted by the DPM. Timofti's answer was to nominate Ion Sturza, former Moldovan politician, who had years before gone to Bucharest for business, where he collaborated with Dinu Patriciu⁴¹.

Plakhotniuk's reaction was swift in coming. The attacks against Timofti continued, the Constitutional Court was petitioned, and answered immediately that the president has to take into account the majority in Parliament, which can at any time be bought and changed. Another front was opened in Parliament, where a number of MPs threatened to initiate dismissal procedures against President Timofti.

In order for things to be even clearer, the controversial oligarch posted on social media on 21 December the decision to return to active political life, announcing he would "take part directly in forming the parliamentary majority". The result was not late in coming; three days later, 14 communist MPs announced they were withdrawing, enlisting in the oligarch's Social Democratic Platform. As Plakhotniuk wrote on social media, it was "an important step towards the consolidation of a solid parliamentary majority" (posted on 24 December).

Far from being unanimously criticized, even though Plakhotniuk's public image was very poor, the oligarch's decision to enter politics was saluted by some commentators. For instance, Vitalie Sprinceană believed that this would legalize the most important part of the Moldovan political and economic underground. By keeping outside of formal politics, Plakhotniuk's influence rose, providing him with ample room to maneuver, which made him all-powerful. Sprinceană believes that his entering formal politics would put the spotlight on Plakhotniuk, cutting off his feeding tubes from the underground, ultimately curbing his influence⁴².

Plakhotniuk's entrance into formal politics caused an explainable effervescence on the center right of the political chessboard, on the pro-European side. On 23rd of December, Maia Sandu announced she would launch a civic platform, which would turn into a party, and Ion Sturza was nominated by the president for the position of prime minister, saying that from then on he would get seriously involved in political life. The two could rather have taken over from pro-European leaders tarnished in corruption scandals, replacing important chess pieces, which were at that point useless. However, their entering the arena did not change the rules of the game. Which is precisely what Moldova would have needed, after it became obvious that the political model by which it had functioned for over two decades was an abysmal failure. Sandu and Sturza fit the pattern centered on charismatic politicians, and not on doctrine, values and priorities, and the two did not have homogeneous teams behind

⁴¹ <http://www.evz.ro/omul-care-l-a-facut-miliardar-pe-patriciu-810400.html> (accessed 4 Jan. 2016).

⁴² www.platzforma.md/protestele-din-moldova-in-citeva-momente/ (accessed 20 Feb. 2016).

them. Because of this political model there are no more confrontations of ideas, programs, projects, and everything is now personal conflict. In fact, the entire political history of Moldova was a long series of “acts of seduction”, followed by “disappointment” in political leaders. The popularity of an idea is directly dependent on the leader's popularity. This is why today the pro-European political orientation is discredited in the eyes of most of the population. Precisely because the ones that promoted this project were discredited⁴³.

The novelty, otherwise very important, in the year 2015, was popular mobilization. It hails back to the *Glasnost* practices in the late '80s and early '90s, when large crowds were protesting in the street. It is the starting point of democracy in all the former Soviet republics. The Dignity and Truth Platform, in a very hostile environment, managed to bring out to the streets tens of thousands of protesters, asking them to get involved, “to take their country back”, and to “punish” the people who stole the billion. What remains to get done for the Dignity and Truth Platform, born out of the protests and which officially registered in February 2016, is for it to consolidate its profile and turn the 2015 civic activism into election figures.

President Timofti Kept in Check

The political crisis in Chișinău entered its decisive phase in the year that Plakhotniuk returned to politics. The text was posted on 21 December, a few days after President Timofti met western ambassadors and complained about the pressure put on him by the DPM. Just like the president, citizen Plakhotniuk met “several foreign partners, officials who came to discuss the political situation in our country, but also members of the diplomatic corps”, to whom he

“presented the solutions... [for getting Moldova out of the crisis – A.G emphasis] and I was asked why I don't get involved in their implementation, if such situations exist. I promised I would get involved, and now the moment has come for me to do it. Starting today, I am getting back to the party and I will participate directly in the formation of the parliamentary majority that will ensure a stable governance, and which I hope will gather the necessary votes to elect the president of the country in March”.

The first moves of the oligarch newly returned to politics were: to launch the Social Democratic Platform, with the 14 communist defectors, creating an offensive apparatus against President Timofti, the last standing in the way of Plakhotniuk's political ambitions.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

Laying the trap that was supposed to limit the president's freedom of movement was accomplished through a decision of the Constitutional Court, which practically forced the president to do whatever Plakhotniuk wanted. The Constitutional Court in Chişinău is well known for its bizarre decisions, which are not just the result of an overheated imagination. For instance, it barred Filat from continuing as a premier; it ruled that the independence declaration trumps the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova; it declared Romanian the state language, even though the Constitution still has Art. 13, which states that the official language is Moldovan. Just like analysts in Chişinău had predicted, the Constitutional Court, at very high speed, ruled in Plakhotniuk's favor. And, in order for things to be clarified as speedily as possible, the chief justice of the court, the controversial Alexandru Tănase, explained the ruling on his personal blog⁴⁴, before it had been issued by the justices⁴⁵. After calling his co-nationals stupid for believing in horoscopes, and saying about Moldovans that they have a “rudimentary” society, the chief justice, who claims to speak “a slightly more elevated Romanian language”, clarified the obscurities in the Constitution:

“The party which wins in the result [sic] of parliamentary elections a majority which allows it to form a government, or a coalition that forms a majority, proposes to the President the name of the Prime Minister”.

However, the majority constituted in Parliament did not reflect the result of the elections, but the level of corruption of politicians, who can be blackmailed, bought and manipulated to form majorities that have nothing to do with the will of the voters.

The clarifications provided by Alexandru Tănase were supposed to prepare for President Timofti's second nomination. It was no secret that Ion Sturza did not stand a chance to be voted in by Parliament. And this was in spite of the fact that Sturza had led the Moldovan government between March and November 1999, when the country was closest to the West, had a very good image, was an independent politician, was outside the semi-mafioso relations between political-criminal groups in Chişinău, was a respected businessman in Romania, where he came to reside, was a good manager, and an effective communicator. All these details mattered not at all. The treatment to which the Sturza team was subjected at the meeting on January 4 is proof of the fact that, in Moldova, institutions and procedures are no longer respected, even in form. The premier designate was not allowed to submit his governance platform, and President Candu said that only 47 MPs were present in the room, out of 101; the boycott supposedly meant that “the attempt is considered failed, and the

⁴⁴ www.tanase.md/moldova-tara-oamenilor-care-cred-in-horoscop/ (accessed 1 Feb. 2016).

⁴⁵ <http://www.constcourt.md/ccdocview.php?l=ro&tip=hotariri&docid=553> (accessed 1 Feb. 2016).
Hotărâre Nr. 32 din 29.12.2015.

president [Timofti – A.G. emphasis] has to make another proposal for the position of premier”. After resuming consultations with political parties and taking into consideration the latest clarifications from the Constitutional Court, obviously⁴⁶.

Disappointed with the brutal treatment, Sturza turned in his mandate to the president, announced he was retiring from political life, and went back to Bucharest. Sturza had barely left Parliament that DPM chairman Lupu announced that by 11 January, the Social Democratic Platform would hold the simple 51 vote majority to have the government sworn in.

The DPM pressure on President Timofti seems to have made him resist Plakhotniuk's demands. It had become personal, which made it highly unlikely that the nomination of the controversial oligarch for prime minister would be accepted. There seemed to be a few things to indicate that: the firm response to Lupu's accusations; the meeting with western ambassadors; the New Year address to the citizens of the Republic of Moldova⁴⁷; the statement made after the January 5 meeting with the leaders of parliamentary parties, to whom he gave a week for negotiations, and asked them to take into account, in forming a new coalition, the pro-European leaning of the citizenry, and for the candidates proposed for prime minister to “meet the criteria for integrity and not be under suspicion of corruption”⁴⁸.

As promised, DPM chairman Marian Lupu submitted a statement on January 11 forming a new majority around his party to support Vlad Plakhotniuk as a candidate for PM. The document was signed by Lupu, Ghimpu, Violeta Ivanova and Ion Bălan. Lupu claimed he was signing on behalf of 20 (Democrat) MPs, Ghimpu for 13 Liberals, Ivanova for 15 ex-communists, and Bălan for 8 (former Liberal Democrats who stayed in the party led by Streleț, but who announced their support for Plakhotniuk). The new majority numbered 56 deputies. Some commentators pointed out that this new majority did not comply with Parliament rules, therefore it was not legitimate. However, only Democrats and Liberals make up groups, accounting for 33

⁴⁶ <http://www.dw.com/ro/investirea-guvernului-sturza-a-eșuat/a-18957906> (accessed 5 Jan. 2016).

⁴⁷ “The year 2015 proved to us that the natural enthusiasm with which we lived with our European achievements, has to turn into concrete action, of restoring health to public climate, of eradicating corruption, including political corruption, of eliminating slips and shortcomings in society. I am optimistic that it is within our power[s] to reach these objectives. You have inspired this confidence in me and I have heard the whisper of the people, but then their cries of hope too. The entire political class has to bend its ear to you, in order to achieve normalcy, achieve authentic democracy, in which the people is sovereign, and its will sacred.” <http://presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/mesajul-de-revelion-al-presedintelui-nicolae-timofti> (accessed 4 Jan. 2016).

⁴⁸ <http://presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedintele-timofti-a-purtat-consultari-parlamentare> (accessed 14 Jan. 2016).

deputies, which is no majority. According to the rules, groups form in 10 days from Parliament taking office. What Ivanova and Bălan formed can be called platforms, but not parliamentary groups, and the ruling of the Constitutional Court speaks of parliamentary factions, which make up the majority⁴⁹. Consequently, Violeta Ivanova and Bălan's groups do not count, and therefore the declaration of forming a new majority does not apply in their case which cancels the Declaration of forming a new majority. Legally, there is a declaration of support for Plahotniuk's candidacy, but not a declaration of forming a majority, which is a Constitutional Court requirement, and the declaration in support of the oligarch would not have the legal power to obligate President Timofti to endorse him as PM.

In order to comply with the calendar imposed by Moldovan law, President Timofti would have had to nominate the new PM before January 14, allowing him to have the 15 days prescribed by law to appoint a new government and prepare a platform. The last day for voting in the new government was January 29, because that is when three months passed since the no-confidence motion against the Streleț government. In the event that this calendar had not been complied with, the parties would have had to call for snap elections, which would have been a disaster for many. The latest public opinion barometer indicated catastrophic figures for parties in Parliament. According to a November poll, first place would have been taken by Our Party (Renato Usatyi), with 16%, followed by a party that did not exist yet, the Platform for Dignity and Truth, organizer of the protests (Andrei Năstase), with 12%, the SPRM (Igor Dodon) – 10%, the CPRM (V. Voronin) – 7%, the PPEM (Iurie Leancă) – 7%, the DPM (Lupu-Plahotniuk) – 6%, the LP (M. Ghimpu) – 5%⁵⁰. Given the conditions, it is hard to believe that the MPs were in a hurry to give up their privileges and vote against nominating the president and in favor of snap elections. The decisive move went to President Timofti, because the nominated candidate had infinitely more opportunities to gain, on the second attempt try, the necessary vote in Parliament. Hence, the intensified battle around the person the president was about to nominate.

The president was supposed to decide based on two factors: the ruling of the Constitutional Court, dramatically limiting his room for maneuver, and the position of Western governments, expressed by their ambassadors in Chișinău. Many abuses about to be perpetrated by Moldovan political elites have been blocked by Western ambassadors down along the years.

⁴⁹ <http://newsmaker.md/rus/kartoteka/vladimir-plahotnyuk-vydvynut-dempartiey-na-post-premera-eto-bylo-sdelano-zakonno-i> (accessed 14 Jan. 2016).

⁵⁰ A CBS-AXA poll conducted in February 2015 confirmed the results: Our Party (Usatyi) – 32%, the Socialist Party (Dodon) – 21%, the Dignity and Truth Party (Năstase) – 13.3%, the Action and Solidarity Party (Maia Sandu) – 10%, the Democratic Party (Lupu) – 7%, European Populists (Leancă) – 6%.

The opposition opened two fronts. One against Plakhotniuk, saying that he did not meet the integrity criteria, as explicitly required by the president at the January 5 meeting⁵¹ with the parties. It was recalled that Plakhotniuk was on a list of people monitored by the Interpol, that the oligarch had defied a British court, by moving seized assets. It was recalled that the British press had reported how several offshore companies registered in Scotland had been involved in the theft of one billion dollars from Moldovan banks, and that those same offshore companies had taken part in the financial raids in Moldova in 2010-2012, whose final beneficiary had been that same Plakhotniuk. Those Scottish offshores were also involved in money laundering schemes between 2012-2014, when \$20 billion from Russia got laundered through Moldovan courts and banks.

The second front the opposition opened was against the MPs who joined Plakhotniuk, especially the 7 Liberal-Democrat MPs⁵². They responded publicly with a press release in which they repeated Plakhotniuk's arguments, bringing new geopolitical arguments for which they decided to support the controversial oligarch:

“The Republic of Moldova is in an unprecedented crisis... considering the geopolitical struggle in the region, the continuation of this political crisis might bring to a halt forever the country's European integration course [...] The political parties that oppose the European vector and plead for rapid advance towards the East, for integrating Moldova into a compromised Customs Union, but also for the federalization of the country, wish to throw Moldova right away into snap elections, with the subsequent formation of a new anti-European majority. The federalization of the country and the entire planned scenario would be a catastrophe for the citizens of our country. Right now we believe that the Republic of Moldova needs stability more than ever”⁵³.

Too Much Geopolitics

Geopolitical arguments are omnipresent in the discourse on the former Soviet republic. Bessarabia was annexed by Stalin in the summer of 1940, in line with the secret appendices to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, and on 23 August 1939 its borders were redrawn, and a large part of the territory became

⁵¹ www.ziarulnational.md/pacatele-lui-plahotniuc-despre-care-tace-lupu/ (accessed 13 Jan. 2016)

⁵² *Олигархическая Молдова*, Vladimir Hotineanu, Ion Bălan, Ștefan Creangă, Nae-Simion Pleșca, Gheorghe Mocanu, Mihaele Spatari, Aliona Goța. <http://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/pacatele-liberal-democratilor-care-au-anuntat-ca-vor-vota-un-premier-democrat> (accessed 12 Jan. 2016).

⁵³ www.zdg.md/stiri-politice-cum-motiveaza-7-deputati-pldm-votul-pentru-un-guvern-pdm (accessed 12 Jan. 2016).

the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, with another part being annexed by Soviet Ukraine. Since everything, or almost everything, is geopolitics, essential details on Moldovan society, economy and politics are confined to oblivion. No one wants to burden their memory with things they believe insignificant. Hence the tragedy of this country, whom no one wants to deal with in seriousness, and which progresses only on internal impulses.

The veritable propaganda war between these two factions interpret the Chișinău crisis exclusively as a confrontation between the U.S. and Russia. In the more sophisticated commentaries, Romania is being attributed a decisive role in events in Moldova, due to such a busy agenda in Washington and Brussels, occupied with other issues. Romania is supposed to be using this context to promote its own interests and people, the most important of them being Plakhotniuk. And that comes on top of the fact that he is detested by over 90% of the population. What, then, is Romania's strategy supposed to be? "The worse for Moldova, the better for Romania"⁵⁴, runs the slogan which pro-Russian analysts in Chișinău claim is Romania's slogan. According to them, Plakhotniuk is Romania's ideal pawn for such a strategy, of pushing the Moldovan state to the brink⁵⁵. Plakhotniuk is supposed to be Bucharest's guarantee for a failed Moldovan state, the first step towards a Moldovan and Romanian union. That is also the geopolitical explanation supplied by the pro-Russian analysts when writing that Romania and the U.S. are categorically opposed to early elections for the Moldovan Parliament, and therefore against democracy. According to polls, these elections would allegedly favor parties considered pro-Russian. No one is considering the fact that they may be as pro-Russian as they are pro-European. In other words, they would be mere vehicles for various semi-criminal leaders or groups used to access state resources, as has happened so far, while the West-East orientation is simple babble to be sold to a humiliated voter base living in the poorest of European countries.

In fact, geopolitics was utilized cynically by irresponsible Moldovan politicians, who were hiding their lack of appetite for reforms by blaming the

⁵⁴ "Чем хуже молдаванам, тем лучше румынам" (Cu cât mai rău pentru moldoveni, cu atât mai bine pentru români), Dmitri Chubashenko, "Plahotniuk gotovit blitzkrieg is <Nobila> v Kondritzu", <http://pan.md/blog/plahotnyuk-gotovit-blitzkrieg-iz-nobila-v-kondritsu> (accessed 19 Feb. 2016).

⁵⁵ "Bucharest needs Plakhotniuk in order to definitively kill Moldovan statehood, to bring everything to full anarchy and disorientation, best of all – to war. Romanian patrons will keep Plakhotniuk in power, but will not give Moldova resources for development, limiting itself to humanitarian spaghetti instead." (Бухаресту нужен Плахотнюк, чтобы окончательно убить государственность Молдовы, довести все до полной анархии и дезориентации, а лучше всего — до войны. Румынские покровители будут удерживать Плахотнюка у власти, но не будут давать Молдове ресурсов на развитие, ограничившись гуманитарными макаронами". *Ibidem* (accessed 19 Feb. 2016).

regional and global context. And why give up these arguments, if they were the only ones that could mobilize support in various capitals and unblock loans? Just as the Ukrainian political elite, the one in Chișinău worked based on the principle “the gentle lamb suckles two sheep”! The country has been swinging for over 20 years between Russia and the West, trying to reap maximum benefits, especially personal, after bringing the country to the brink of disaster. In order to save themselves, Moldovan leaders are invoking the same geopolitical considerations, in the hope of tricking someone once again into support, this time the West.

One contribution to the the geopolitical rhetoric manipulation of the West is also made by Bucharest, who has a long experience in this game, starting as far back as 1964, during the rule of communist leader Gheorghiu-Dej. For the duration of this crisis, for the Foreign Ministry and the presidency in Bucharest, as well as for the majority of politicians, the marching order was maintaining at any price the *status quo* in Chișinău, on the reason that elections would bring to power Dodon and Usaty, who are “strongly and openly” supported by Russia⁵⁶. No dignitary in Bucharest has yet explained if the Moldovan elections should get suspended *sine die* for fear of Russia, or how Moscow would help a pro-Russian politician, considering how much trouble Russia has with financially supporting the separatist region of Transdnestr.

The Compromise that Prolongs the Agony

One day before the deadline for designating the premier, Wednesday, January 13, a new round of consultations took place between the president and the representatives of the majority group, constituted to support Plakhotniuk in his bid to become prime minister. The president rejected the controversial oligarch's candidacy, invoking the provisions of the Constitution and the Constitutional Court ruling of 22 April 2013, according to which “any political mandate has to be based on high integrity standards”, and “it is contrary to the principles of the rule of law the appointment to political office of persons over whom suspicions of lack of integrity loom”. According to the Moldovan presidency, Plakhotniuk “does not meet the integrity criteria necessary for his appointment to the position of Prime Minister”, recalling Parliament's decision of 15 February 2013, when the oligarch was deposed by no-confidence vote as

⁵⁶ A post on social media from former PM Victor Ponta on 15 January 2016. The former SDP leader has long been a supporter of Plakhotniuk's DPM, made official through agreements signed at the central headquarters of the SDP in Kiseleff Blvd. Several pieces of information coming from Chișinău suggest that Ponta's entire presidential campaign was supposed to have been financed by the controversial oligarch.

deputy speaker of Parliament, accused of involvement in illegal activities⁵⁷. President Timofti called on the majority to propose a new candidate, meeting the integrity criteria, by the following day, Thursday, 14 January, at noon. Commentators drew a parallel between Filip, who was not allowed to take up the premier seat by ruling of the Constitutional Court, and Plakhotniuk, who was deposed for similar reasons.

The oligarch tried to overcome Timofti's resistance, attacking his arguments. Helping him, as on other occasions, was Chief Justice Alexandru Tănase, who replied on social media that Filat could have held any position⁵⁸. This was an awkward move on the part of the head justice of the Constitutional Court in attempting to help Plakhotniuk, attacking arguments he had offered himself in 2013, when he blocked Filat's access to the highest positions in the state for integrity reasons. A few hours later, Tănase went back to social media, saying that he had not commented on the president's decision⁵⁹. It was probably this intervention that caused Timofti to request individual confirmations for the signatures given by the deputies⁶⁰, on the Declaration that created the new majority around the DPM, giving a deadline for 9:00 PM, January 14. This latest request by the president seemed as an additional defense line against the Plakhotniuk-Tănase tandem. One other ineffective move was the awkward letter sent by Plakhotniuk to President Timofti on January 14, in which the oligarch tried to assure the president of the "honesty and fairness" of his intentions⁶¹. Even if appearances were kept up, and institutions seemed to work, the tensions in Chișinău had reached a peak, amplified by the rumors about the resignation of President Timofti, who categorically refused to designate the oligarch to the position of prime minister⁶². In this state of extreme tension, lacking political allies, President Timofti had a telephone conversation with Ion Sturza, who was

⁵⁷ <http://presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedintele-nicolae-timofti-respinge-candidatura-domnului-vladimir-plahotniuc-la-functia-de-prim-ministru> (accessed 14 Jan. 2016).

⁵⁸ <http://unimedia.info/stiri/tanase--despre-decizia-lui-timofti-de-a-l-respinge-pe-plahotniuc-107697.html> (accessed 14 Jan. 2016).

⁵⁹ <http://unimedia.info/stiri/alexandru-tanase-niciodata-nici--intr-un-context-nu-am-comentat-decizia-presedintelui-timofti-107706.html> (accessed 14 Jan. 2016). Formally, this was true, because Tănase had stated that Filat could have taken up any position in the state. However, at that point Filat was under arrest, and no one was interested in him. However, now commentators had transferred the arguments in the Court ruling of April 2013 from the Filat case to Plakhotniuk's. Tănase said that Filat could have held any position in the state, indirectly saying that Plakhotniuk could as well, therefore President Timofti's arguments were not valid.

⁶⁰ <http://presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedintele-timofti-solicita-majoritatii-parlamentare-reconfirmarea-semnaturilor-in-sustinerea-unui-candidat-la-functia-de-prim-ministru> (accessed 14 Jan. 2016).

⁶¹ http://www.realitatea.md/confirmat-plahotniuc-i-a-scris-o-scrisoare-lui-timofti-pentru-a-l-convinge-sa-l-desemneze-la-func-tia-de-premier-cite-te-aici_32811.html (accessed 14 Jan. 2016).

⁶² Interview with Igor Boțan (Bucharest, February 2016)

in Bucharest, deciding to propose him once again as candidate for prime minister. In fact, Sturza was getting ready to depart for Chișinău when he heard news that Timofti had designated for the position of prime minister Ion Păduraru, his chief of staff⁶³. Marian Lupu recalled later that he found out about Păduraru's appointment while en route to the president's residence in Condrita, with the list of signatures demanded by the president⁶⁴. In his intervention, Timofti said that he had appointed Păduraru because "the coalition did not have the necessary number of votes". From then on, everything depended on the deputies. If they did not accept the candidacy, the president reminded them, "we have met the premises for early elections, even though I do not want them"⁶⁵. It didn't take long for commentators to recall that Păduraru's name appears in Ilan Șor's self-incrimination, the one that led to the arrest of former premier Filat. In that document, Păduraru is mentioned as go-between for Le Bridge company in its relation to PM Filat, a major vulnerability, especially considering that Plakhotniuk controlled the General Prosecutor's Office. Political tensions did not dissipate at all with Păduraru's nomination. Friday, January 15 at noon, as Sturza told the press, President Timofti was convinced that Păduraru was determined to operate reforms, starting to take the country away from oligarchs. However, 3 hours and a half later, the president's candidate not only withdrew his candidacy, but asked Timofti to consider the candidacy of Pavel Filip, proposed by the Plakhotniuk controlled majority⁶⁶. The president, shortly after, nominated for the position of PM Pavel Filip⁶⁷, the candidate proposed by the DPM majority, and Plakhotniuk's associate⁶⁸.

⁶³ <http://presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedintele-timofti-l-a-desemnata-pe-domnul-ion-paduraru-in-calitate-de-candidat-la-functia-de-prim-ministru> (accessed 14 Jan. 2015)

⁶⁴ Marian Lupu told Publika TV: "This is a surprising decision, which we do not understand. Not long ago, after discussions with the head of state and the presidency, we, the leadership of the DP, were invited to see the president to coordinate another proposal for the position of prime minister; halfway there we were informed that the situation had changed, and shortly after the decree was issued", <http://presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedintele-timofti-l-a-desemnata-pe-domnul-ion-paduraru-in-calitate-de-candidat-la-functia-de-prim-ministru> (accessed 14 Jan. 2015). DPM Chairman Lupu went to President Timofti's residence accompanied by Pavel Filip, acting minister of IT and Telecom, which was about to be proposed for the position of prime minister.

⁶⁵ <http://presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedintele-timofti-l-a-desemnata-pe-domnul-ion-paduraru-in-calitate-de-candidat-la-functia-de-prim-ministru> (accessed 14 Jan. 2015).

⁶⁶ <http://newsmaker.md/rus/novosti/nikolae-timofti-obveli-vokrug-kandidata-kak-bylo-sorvano-povtorno-vydvizhenie-v-p-21633> (accessed 16 Jan. 2016).

⁶⁷ <http://presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/presedintele-timofti-l-a-desemnata-pe-domnul-pavel-filip-in-calitate-de-candidat-la-functia-de-prim-ministru> (accessed 16 Jan. 2016).

⁶⁸ <http://jurnal.md/ro/politic/2016/1/15/socor-pavel-filip-este-o-persoana-dintre-cele-mai-apropiate-ale-lui-vladimir-plahotniuc/> (accessed 16 Jan. 2016).

In fact, Filip was among the few who stood by the oligarch during the rally held by DPM in downtown Chişinău in support of Plakhotniuk's candidacy for PM, on January 13. Not even chairman Lupu or honorary president Dumitru Diacov were on the stage, next to Plakhotniuk, on that occasion. But Filip came up alongside Plakhotniuk, whom he does business with. Only two names had been considered in the DPM, aside from Plakhotniuk: Candu, Speaker of Parliament, and Filip, Minister of IT and Telecom.

Several commentators said that Păduraru was the weakest link in Timofti's entourage, and that the chief of staff of the presidency played for Plakhotniuk's team. Păduraru's main mission was to block Sturza's nomination for PM. Păduraru is supposed to have convinced Timofti to nominate him, persuading him that this move would destabilize Plakhotniuk⁶⁹. Hence the naïveté that made the president assure Sturza that Păduraru would start the fight against oligarchs, mere hours before resigning. Pavel Filip's designation was a clear victory for Plakhotniuk.

Faced with heavy opposition from protesters on the streets, the president supplied additional explanations:

“A majority of 55 MPs proposed a candidacy, that of Mr. Pavel Filip, which I had to accept, pursuant to the decision issued on 29 December 2015 by the Constitutional Court, which, at art. 118, states, quote: ‘there is no constitutional and democratic reason for which the President should not designate as candidate for PM the person holding a parliamentary majority, be it even in opposition to the President’. Beyond all personal opinion, I am obligated, in line with my attributions as president, to comply with the country's laws, and, in the present case, the rulings of the Constitutional Court”⁷⁰.

The president's nomination sparked a new wave of street protests. In spite of the bitter cold in Chişinău, tens of thousands took over the central square for days. Leading them was a troika of political leaders: the chairman of the Socialists, Dodon, the eccentric mayor of Bălţi, the head of Our Party, Usatyi, and the head of the Platform for Dignity and Truth Party, Năstase. The hatred of an impoverished, lied to, and manipulated population, which saw in Plakhotniuk the epitome of evil, is the main common link for these three leaders and hundreds of thousands of people, brought to the streets in various corners of Moldova by despair. All of a sudden, on the streets of Chişinău you could hear cries of “Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, we are all Moldovan!”. In a sense, Plakhotniuk managed to create, in a few months, a common platform bringing together various Moldovan ethnic groups, traditionally opposed, usually

⁶⁹ Păduraru's reaction to these accusations: <http://ziarulnational.md/cum-raspunde-paduraru-acuzatiilor-ca-l-a-tras-pe-sfoara-pe-timofti-si-a-facut-jocul-pd/> (accessed 17 Jan. 2016).

⁷⁰ <http://presedinte.md/rom/comunicate-de-presa/declaratie-a-presedintelui-republicii-moldova-nicolae-timofti> (accessed 16 Jan. 2016).

artificially so. In fact, Plakhotniuk only brought to life art. 12 of the Democratic Party Statute, which “is in favor of the creation and affirmation in the Republic of Moldova of the civic nation according to the principle ‘we are all Moldovans – citizens of the Republic of Moldova’”⁷¹.

The last hope for the protest leaders and the tens of thousands out into the cold was a visit by the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasian Affairs, Victoria Nuland. That the US would intervene in Moldova was an illusion, the idea that it would take this country out from under the control of oligarch Plakhotniuk. The drama in Chișinău was added to by rumors that had persistently circulated in the summer-fall of 2015, according to which, Plakhotniuk had negotiated in Washington and Berlin political support in order to gain total control of Moldova⁷². The rumors were so intense that commentators, journalists and politicians came to believe them, and were now just waiting for confirmation or contradiction of the theory according to which the U.S. had sold out Moldova to oligarch Plakhotniuk. According to that same theory, Romania was forced by the U.S. to reluctantly support the detested oligarch⁷³.

On Monday, January 18, Victoria Nuland was in Bucharest, where she held talks with Romanian top officials, including about the Moldovan crisis. It mattered little that the statements made by the American official were much more nuanced, what mattered was an article where the emphasis was on stability and support for the Filip government⁷⁴. The entire Moldovan press, both the part controlled by Plakhotniuk⁷⁵ and the part supporting the opposition, Romanian and Russian speaking, carried the same tune: the Americans, the State Department, support Plakhotniuk⁷⁶. This had only increased the confusion

⁷¹ <http://www.pdm.md/ro/pdm/statut> (accessed 14 Jan. 2015). Igor Boțan pointed out to me this article in the DPM statute.

⁷² Interviews with various Moldovan journalists (Chișinău, September-October 2015), interviews with Arcadie Barbăroșie, Igor Boțan, Petru Negură (Chișinău, September 2015).

⁷³ The networks spreading the rumors, as I personally saw during a number of research visits to Chișinău, were sympathetic to Plakhotniuk and the DPM, as well as to Ghimpu and the LP.

⁷⁴ <http://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-20736035-victoria-nuland-despre-situatia-din-republica-moldova-cel-mai-important-lucru-existe-guvern-puternic-pro-european.htm> (accessed 18 Jan. 2016). This HotNews piece of news was subsequently taken over by the entire Russian language press in Moscow, with titles like: “The USA Supports Oligarch Plakhotniuk!”. HotNews is a credible source in Romania.

⁷⁵ Roughly 80% of the press in Moldova is controlled by Plakhotniuk. Prime TV, 2 Plus, Canal 3, Publika Tv, as well as major radio stations are owned by the oligarch, as part of the Dutch off-shore OTIV Prime Media.

⁷⁶ Most were news, with the title repeating the names Victoria Nuland and Plakhotniuk. There have been somewhat more sophisticated commentaries, abounding in geopolitical explanations, attempting to explain the US decision. “Штатный режим: Владимир Плахотнюк получил поддержку Вашингтона”, <http://newsmaker.md/rus/>

regarding the West's intentions towards Moldova, the population of which had every reason to feel left to the mercy of the oligarch, in poverty, corruption, moral and material decay.

The Russian press did not miss the opportunity to criticize Plakhotniuk, the oligarch detested by an entire country, but “supported by the State Department”⁷⁷, emphasizing the fact that he is duplicitous to the West, claiming to support democracy, but in Moldova's case he is against the snap elections desired by the majority of the population, according to polls. Public opinion was thus being injected with the idea that Moscow is close to the oppressed Moldovan people, suffering as a result of the corruption and nepotism of a pro-European elite pushing the country towards Brussels. If Russia was with the people, America supported the oppressor of the people, Plakhotniuk. Victoria Nuland's statements on the need to form a stable government in Chişinău confirmed the theory according to which Moldovans were sold out to Plakhotniuk, feeding the anti-Western Russian propaganda, and especially the anti-American propaganda in Moldova.

The “confirmation” that the West supported Plakhotniuk was the turning point in the protests in Chişinău. Gradually, the initiative in coordinating the street protests – which continued in February and March – went to Dodon and Usaty, who are considered anti-Western, and even pro-Russian, in the case of the Socialist leader. Dodon and Usaty went from inspiration (from the slogans of the protest movement) on to claim and play a more important role in the street protests and influence the protester's agenda. Only the leader of the new pro-European Dignity and Truth Party, Andrei Năstase, who started the civic protests in early 2015, seems to keep pace with the new political trends. The rest of the parties seem to have lost ground. This evolution could be observed at the protests sparked by the almost clandestine Parliament session in Chişinău on Wednesday, 20 January, when the Pavel Filip government was sworn in within 30 minutes, in defiance of regulations⁷⁸, 57

novosti/shtatnyy-rezhim-vladimir-plahotnyuk-poluchil-podderzhku-vashingtona-21687 (accessed 19 Jan. 2016); Dmitri Chubashenko, “Госдеп оказался бессильным против прущего, кат танк, Плахотнюка”, <http://pan.md/blog/formula-pravitelstva-plahotnyuka-jadnost--strah--repressii-i-degradatsiya> (accessed 17 Jan. 2016), issued by several analysis or news websites such as <http://omg.md/index.php?newsid=11602> (accessed 18 Jan. 2016).

⁷⁷ <http://pan.md/politika/rossiya-1-plahotnyuk-nachinal-kak-sutener-video> (accessed 15 Feb. 2016). The report on Plakhotniuk is from TV Rossiya -1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNrhEyxqN6o> (accessed 15 Feb. 2016).

⁷⁸ This meeting was short notice, announced only a few hours ahead, which runs against the tradition of swearing in meetings. The premier designate, faced with the aggression of the Socialist faction in the room, failed to submit its platform, and the customary hearing failed being held as well. The session sparked violent protests in Chişinău. <http://www.mediafax.ro/externe/proteste-violente-la-chisinau-dupa-votul-parlamentului->

votes out of 101. In order to formally comply with the legislation, the members of government were secretly taken to President Timofti's residence to get sworn in, right before midnight⁷⁹.

Most likely, these protests, violent in certain places, drew attention from the West. The visit made by PM Filip to Bucharest, less than a week from starting his term, was seen with suspicion by foreign embassies in Chișinău, Bucharest and Brussels. The haste with which the Cioloș government was willing to loosen purse strings in favor of its Moldovan partner was tempered by both President Jean-Claude Juncker and Commissioner Johannes Hahn⁸⁰. Several diplomatic sources have confirmed that Brussels called on the Romanian government not to hurry in supplying 60 million Euro in loans for Moldova, and to wait for the arrival of the IMF delegation to Chișinău and the release of aid from Brussels. When Filip visited Bucharest, in addition to making the argument for stability, PM Cioloș also talked about ongoing reform. Releasing aid for Moldova was conditioned on “a few concrete measures, proving the will to reform” on behalf of the Filip government. PM Cioloș promised he would make public by the end of the week “a list of several measures the government could take before releasing from Bucharest this first installment”. In addition, Cioloș continued: “I suggested intense dialog with civil society in the Republic of Moldova, with the protesters who want the Republic of Moldova to follow a European course”⁸¹. That was a cold shower for PM Filip, who did not expect such a speech, in flagrant contradiction with everything Romanian institutions had, so far, issued officially in terms of Moldova. That was puzzling for the press in Chișinău too, as they continued to cover the success of Filip's visit to Bucharest and the release of the loan that was going to pay for the December and January wages and pensions.

A few days later, PM Cioloș wrote a letter to his counterpart in Chișinău, laying out the conditions for the loan⁸². Right in the first few lines,

in-favoarea-guvernului-pavel-filip-ue-si-sua-indeamna-la-calm-si-dialog-foto-video-14973808 (accessed 21 Jan. 2016).

⁷⁹ http://www.realitatea.net/chi-inau-guvernul-lui-pavel-filip-va-fi-votat-azi-in-parlament-sociali-tii-cer-proteste_1869977.html (accessed 21 Jan. 2016).

⁸⁰ http://www.realitatea.net/chi-inau-guvernul-lui-pavel-filip-va-fi-votat-azi-in-parlament-sociali-tii-cer-proteste_1869977.html (accessed 21 Jan. 2016).

⁸¹ <http://gov.ro/print?modul=stiri&link=premierul-dacian-ciolos-s-antalnit-cu-omologul-sau-din-republica-moldova-pavel-filip> (accessed 27 Jan. 2016)

⁸² <http://gov.ro/print?modul=stiri&link=premierul-dacian-ciolos-a-trimis-astazi-omologului-sau-din-republica-moldova-pavel-filip-o-scrisoare-care-detaliaza-continutul-discutiilor-avute-la-bucuresti-in-data-de-26-ianuarie-2016-in-legatura-cu-acordul-de-imprumut-dintre-romania-si-republica-moldova> (accessed 30 Jan. 2016). Reform of the judiciary was mentioned only at the tail of the list, in addition to an anti-corruption package and estate verification, etc., which the protesters had been clamoring for from the start. Hence the disappointment with the conditions set by Bucharest.

Bucharest reaffirmed support for “civic dialog between authorities and the representatives of civil society”, which seems to confirm a shift in attitude towards Moldova. Political leaders and civil society in Chişinău were rather dismayed by the conditions set by Romania⁸³, which pinned to the end of the list the issue of the judiciary, even though the reform of the public prosecutor's office and anti-corruption were the main demands from protesters. A few days later, the Civic Forum of Moldova, which gathers together representatives of civil society, protesters, and opposition and outside Parliament parties, submitted a resolution⁸⁴ on 4 February, with a list of demands, much more to the point, in which the emphasis fell more on the functioning of the National Bank of Moldova, in order to prevent embezzlement on the level that was perpetrated in the three banks, but mostly on the reform of the judiciary and fighting corruption⁸⁵.

Brussels stopped being contemplative and letting its relationship to Moldova run through Bucharest. The EC published 13 recommendations addressed to the Republic of Moldova on 15 February⁸⁶. They recommended reforms for depoliticizing state institutions, combating systemic corruption, reforming public administration (par. 4); the serious and impartial investigation of banking theft (art. 6); providing for the independence of the judiciary and anti-corruption institutions, reforming the public prosecution system and the fight against corruption (art. 7), etc. The general impression left is that the 13 conclusions of the Council are much closer to what the civic and political opposition demanded in 2015 from the powers that be in Chişinău than the semblance of conditions laid out by the Cioleş government.

The parliamentary majority and the Plakhotniuk controlled government

⁸³ Interviews with politicians and civil society leaders who attended the Civil Society Forum in Chişinău (January 2016).

⁸⁴ <http://independent.md/doc-rezolutia-forumului-civic-ce-solicita-protestatarii-de-la-guvernare/#.VtUKj8dYnkI> (accessed 4 Feb. 2016).

⁸⁵ The proposals were truly revolutionary, depoliticizing the judiciary: “4. Consolidating rule of law, regulation and control institutions by: a) The resignation of the Prosecutor General; b) Parliament dismissing the top ranks of the National Anti-Corruption Council; c) Selecting the future top ranks of the National Anti-Corruption Council and the head prosecutor for anti-corruption by a commission made up of trained experts who are politically unaffiliated; d) Appointing with no delay by the Government as justice of the Constitutional Court of the candidate already identified as a result of the competition held in the year 2015”. In article 5 the demand was made to review political party regulation legislation, in art. 6 a demand for limiting the consolidation of media, in art. 7 a demand for electing the president by popular vote by changing the law, in art. 8 the cessation of legal proceedings against protesters and the release of political prisoners. *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶ Council of the EU. Council conclusions on the Republic of Moldova, Press Release, 15/02/2016. They were translated and published in the Moldova's newspaper: <http://ziarulnational.md/cele-13-concluzii-ale-consiliului-ue-cu-referire-la-r-moldova/> (accessed 16 Feb. 2016).

have a few urgent issues to deal with. First of all there is the release of the loans, without which Moldova risks a financial meltdown. The Chișinău government will have to make a few reforms to convince the West of its good intentions. So far, what Chișinău brandished as reforms is a long list of dismissals of public officials and appointments of people close to Plakhotniuk, as well as passing a few laws with bizarre provisions introduced at the last moment. Rather hard to persuade the West with such meager fodder. The IMF and the EU are less lenient than the government in Bucharest, and will demand from the Filip government something more substantial than vague promises. In turn, the government run by Cioloș, made up of people dreaming of returning to Brussels, to work for the EC or the European External Action Service, for thousands of Euros in salaries, will not contradict the Commission in order to fund Chișinău. These people will not ruin the relationships they have built in Brussels for the sake of more obscure arrangements made by who knows who or why. The short circuiting of the relationship between Bucharest and Chișinău by Brussels and Washington seems a fact that bears confirming. The moment of attention that Chișinău enjoyed on behalf of the violent protests that marked the investiture of the Filip government could be fast replaced by a lack of interest. The regional instability may be an advantage for the opposition, but so far the Ukrainian crisis has been put to better use by the Plakhotniuk faction, which threatens the West with the setting up in Parliament a pro-Russian majority in case of early elections.

The most important political test for the majority built around the DPM comes in a few weeks, when Timofti's term expires. Most commentators in Chișinău believe that Plakhotniuk holds 61 votes towards becoming president. However, there are two problems facing him: street protests, which could escalate, throwing Moldova into chaos; and foreign governments, aware that Plakhotniuk as a president could mean an official takeover of power by criminal elements of post-Soviet origin.

After failing in becoming PM, Plakhotniuk could be forced into the underground of politics, promoting as president a close associate, such as Pavel Filip was. One name intensely circulated is that of Monica Babiuc, Minister of Culture, member of the DPM, and a close associate of Plakhotniuk. Any real reform in Moldova is a direct threat to the control that Plakhotniuk wields over various institutions. Since the West has a lot to deal with (refugees, the UK referendum, extending sanctions against Russia, the Ukrainian crisis, the tensions between Russia and Turkey, the Syrian crisis, etc), after securing the release of loans to Moldova and getting through the issue of selecting the president, Moldova may not enjoy such much attention. Therefore, the people in power in Chișinău will give up miming reforms and will try to push for an authoritarian political regime. Moldova, however, is not Belarus, not even

Armenia. It is much more influenced by the West, and has a different dominant political culture.

Early elections are still the only solutions for taking the country out of the political crisis it has been mired in. The more they are delayed, the more the chances of a victory for a pro-Russian and anti-European faction taking power will grow. By granting loans, even on condition, the West is buying time. Ideally, during these months the new pro-European parties such as the Dignity and Truth Platform led by Andrei Năstase, or the Action and Solidarity Party led by Maia Sandu, could end up offering the Moldovan voters a plausible pro-European alternative. Early elections, which now seem improbable, could become not only probable, but even desirable by fall, on condition the present parliamentary majority and the Filip government do not achieve reform, calming tensions by dialog with the opposition and civil society.